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Another Reason for Education: Inmate Finds Hope, Purpose, and Support through College-in-Prison Programs

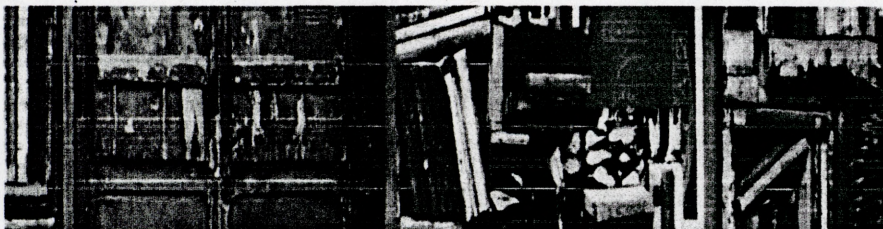
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Tomas Keen is a recent graduate from University Beyond Bars, a college-in-prison program in Monroe, WA, and currently attends Adams State University through a text-based correspondence program. In the last decade, he has co-developed and co-instructed writing and debate classes for other prisoners while also striving for justice reform as a member of the Legislative Committee for the Concerned Lifers Organization. Once released, he hopes to attend law school before starting a career as an advocate for juveniles and emerging adults in the criminal legal system.

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UBB Graduation 2019: Tomas Keen Student Keynote Speech





ANOTHER REASON FOR EDUCATION: INMATE FINDS HOPE, PURPOSE, AND SUPPORT THROUGH COLLEGE-IN-PRISON PROGRAMS

TOMAS MARCO KEEN

In this commencement speech and accompanying essay, Tomas Marco Keen celebrates the possibilities of college-in-prison programs such as University Beyond Bars in Washington State. Describing mass incarceration as “a juggernaut fed by manifold conduits of oppression and exclusion,” Keen highlights a dire lack of funding and support for rehabilitative programs in prison. “Incarceration saturates prisoners with the very factors that produce negative communities: isolation, violence, conflict, shame,” Keen points out. College in prison provides an opportunity for people to “pursue power, identity, and purpose,” and in turn fosters a strong, passionate, confident, and positive community.

Keywords: college in prison, transformative education, graduation

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AN ARCHIPELAGO
OF CAMPS
(JULIETTE)

Introduction

Mass incarceration is a juggernaut fed by manifold conduits of oppression and exclusion. That's the slightly bloated, moderately hyperbolic, and extremely vivid way I've come to describe America's carceral system. Put more simply: Racism, poverty, family violence, mental illness, (take your pick from the vectors of oppression) press already-vulnerable people onto paths that lead, in many cases, to prison. And rather than fund front-end programs that provide off-ramps to better outcomes, our society instead builds carceral facilities in anticipation of future crime. This failed policy emerges from one of two catalysts. The benign version: It's our perennial shortsightedness; a willingness to address a problem once it manifests, but a refusal to act in ways that prevent it from happening to begin with. Or the scary version: It's our voluntary blindness; a deep-rooted preference to bask in our own privilege while ignoring unjust arrangements of power and the suffering this produces. Both options result in warehousing people who have been labeled "threatening to" and "unworthy of" our communities.

If you're not shocked, I'm not surprised—after all, the United States boasts the largest prison population in the world, with rates that I would call alarming if not for our nation's obvious lack of alarm. But what should surprise us all is the lack of funding and support for rehabilitative programs in prison. In an environment defined by scarcity, violence, and shame, one of the rare sources of self-betterment and constructive social bonds—quality education—is increasingly scant.

One program in Washington State is working to change this. University Beyond Bars (universitybeyondbars.org)—a nonprofit operating since 2003 inside the Monroe Correctional Complex—employs funding from private donors and MOUs with Seattle Central College and Adams State University to provide in-person instruction to some of society's most marginalized people. They produce a campus-style atmosphere that allows prisoners to dramatically change their lives.

I know this because it worked for me.

Prison Life, and How College Improves It

It wasn't the first time I was forced to wear another man's boxers, which probably explains why, to me, it didn't seem strange to stand in a chain-link cage with a group of naked men pulling dingy Hanes from a cardboard box. For others, it did. The first-timers awkwardly balked before grabbing a pair, then began inspecting the ceiling as if they were visitors inside the Sistine Chapel—anything to avoid

eye contact. The veterans, on the other hand—like me—slipped on the hand-me-down drawers without a second thought before entering the line to pick up an orange jumpsuit emblazed with tall, black letters: WA DOC.

This degrading scene—inside the arrival-and-departure room at the Washington Corrections Center, a receiving facility—is just the first of many dignity-stripping rituals that contribute to prison's toxic environment. From here, prisoners ride in a transport bus for hours, enveloped in a miasmatic cloud wafting up from the rarely cleaned open-air toilet directly behind the last bench seat. Once at their destination, they'll serve out their sentences in cramped quarters, forced to follow constantly shifting and arbitrarily enforced rules, and always under the suspicion-filled gaze of correctional staff.

And, to be honest, in many cases their fellow prisoners add to this toxicity. Even people who have never been incarcerated hear that the first thing told to new inmates is to find the biggest guy on the yard and knock him down. This is more fiction than fact, but it does capture the essence of prison culture: fellow inmates only respect the potential for violence. It's no surprise, then, that prison is a tough place in which to rehabilitate.

Usually when new arrivals clamber off the bus and into the unit, the anticipation of a fight fills the air—the atmosphere becomes dense, movement seems slower, breathing more difficult. Whether you're new or not, no one knows what long-forgotten-about quarrel will be waiting, or what misguided youngster will decide that today is *the day* to earn his stripes.

That's the reality of serving time in most of Washington State's prisons.

But in September 2016 when I stepped off the smelly bus at the Monroe Correctional Complex, I could feel that something was different. People were studying math in the dayroom, discussing Foucault in the living unit, quizzing each other about homework on the yard. Sure, there were pockets of tension in small enclaves of the yard and unit—these are inevitable in a total institution—but most people seemed more interested in didactic pursuits than drama. And the feature creating the difference between this and other prisons? University Beyond Bars—a nonprofit, college-in-prison program that *empowers prisoners to fulfill their potential through communities of higher learning that transcend prison walls*.

While UBB could benefit from a slightly-less-stilted mission statement—and I've told them this—the work they perform is remarkable. Through a handful of staff and scores of volunteers, UBB delivers four tiers of educational programming. At the first level, they hold a semimonthly lecture series that covers wide-ranging topics. At the second, they provide not-for-credit enrichment courses in math, English, debate, cultural appreciation, and other subjects. Third, they offer a two-and-a-half-year track

to an AA degree. And fourth, they facilitate upper-division, mixed-enrollment courses—known in other jurisdictions as inside-out classes—that combine UBB students with seniors from the University of Washington's Law, Societies, and Justice Department.

This panoply of options—coupled with UBB's inclusive admissions approach—encourages prisoners from diverse circumstances and educational histories to enter the UBB community. It often happens that students who enter on the first or second tier continue to climb until they earn college credit, and one day, a degree.

Graduation Day

At the end of every year, UBB hosts a graduation ceremony in the prison's visiting room with more than 100 guests in attendance. Chairs are lined up in neat rows, a podium is adorned with microphones, and graduates are dressed in cap-and-gown sets. And just like regular college graduations, at times it's emotional.

Last fall, a few weeks before the 2019 ceremony, my classmates asked me to deliver the keynote address. I agreed, and minutes after receiving my Associate of Arts Degree, in a speech titled *My Positive Community* (viewable on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mdg9deS0yfs> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mdg9deS0yfs>)), this is what I said:

Good afternoon. As a member of UBB's debate team—and as a man with aspirations to one day practice law—I am conditioned to meet what Bryan Garner calls the 90-second test. This means that within the first minute and a half I must convey the truncated but clear objective of my speech. So here it is: (1) stand red faced behind the lectern (check), (2) try to make the audience laugh (that one I'm working on), and (3) deliver a moving oration with as few *ums*, *ahs*, and *ya knows* as possible (well, uh, we'll see how that turns out).

Let me begin by thanking my classmates not only for selecting me to speak, but also for their help in preparing for this moment. Many of them gave suggestions on what to include, what not to include, and even what sort of antics I should perform. Now this last one came as a shock. Having never graduated from anything other than jail to prison, I didn't realize that tradition requires me—the keynote speaker—to find funny ways of expressing our relief to be out from under the thumb of school administrators. Several of my peers informed me that skipping this tradition would dishonor the trail blazed by decades of graduating classes before us—not something I wanted to do.

So with this bit of knowledge, the pressure was on to choose the perfect form of defiance against authority—and *I had a few ideas*. At the top of my list were three things: egging the Program Director's car, spiking the punch bowl, and streaking across the room. But hold on. Before people start panicking, let me break the news: I can't get to the parking lot, we don't have any punch, and I will already be strip searched as I leave so streaking would be redundant. Since all my plans are undermined, I have decided to play it safe and leave the antics for someone else. (Sorry to disappoint.)

With the antics out, I still had to decide on the substance of my speech. So, as I normally do when faced with the predicament of needing to sound smart but not knowing how, I turned to Atif—the smartest person I know. He loaned me several articles by brilliant writers such as David Foster Wallace and Leo Strauss, and from these I began cobbling together what *smart* people say at *normal* graduations—believing that if I could just imitate these people, the day would be a success.

But then it hit me: this isn't a normal graduation. As this event takes place, we are surrounded by chain link, razor wire, brick walls, and guard towers—and no attempts at camouflage can change this. Despite the cool hats, the black gowns draped over prison-issue clothing, and the many other ways we mimic the traditions of free people in free spaces celebrating the freeing of minds, we are still here—inside prison. In an atypical situation like this, what am I supposed to talk about? And on that point, Atif's articles were silent.

Without recourse to precedent, I sat down to brainstorm. I started by asking myself, "Self, why are people here today?" Well, to support their loved ones. "And why are they supporting their loved ones?" Because we're graduating. "And why are we graduating?" Because University Beyond Bars has given us the chance to attend college in prison. (Side note: I was a little embarrassed to include that conversation because I thought talking to myself was a product of years in prison. But I was recently told that this is normal—even free people do it.) Anyway, right there at the end of this dialogue was the feature underlying all of today's activities: college in prison.

So that's what I plan to get at today—the value of college in prison. Now I know that some people might question its purpose by asking: "Doesn't incarceration teach enough?" So allow me to clear this up by using something else I learned from Bryan Garner: a syllogism. If incarceration were really enough then the syllogism would look like this:

- *Major Premise.* When people do something bad they go to prison to learn their lesson.
- *Minor Premise.* We did something bad and were sent to prison.
- *Conclusion.* We learned our lesson.

According to this reasoning, college in prison is superfluous—it's extra, nonessential, collateral, not needed. Since going to prison teaches the real lessons—the ones not covered in English or sociology or political science—funding the liberal arts is wasteful.

But in order for a syllogism to be correct each premise must be true, and in this case they're not. Luckily or unluckily, we have a room full of experts on the pedagogic effectiveness of incarceration (my classmates), and each of them I'm sure will confirm that prison teaches no lessons—at least not the good ones.

So let's get to the reasons for college. And I am not talking about the surface-level, read-in-the-newspaper-type stuff that everybody knows. We all know college mitigates recidivism. The AA I receive today reduces my recidivism rate by 70 percent. The BA I get in the future will reduce it by nearly 100 percent. That's undisputed. We also know that college increases the median annual earnings by between 10 and 30 thousand dollars.

But keeping people away from crime and increasing their money-earning potential are good things for all people—not just those caught up in the criminal legal system. Today I want to explore something deeper than these, and more narrowly focused to the carceral setting.

I am about to make a bold claim, one draped in the pageantry of capital-T truth: Life is the pursuit of power, identity, and purpose. Everyone wants to have agency, to know who they are, and to have their actions mean something. And here is another capital-T truth: Prison strips these away from you. It takes your power by locking you in a cell, constantly reminding you of your subordinate position. It reduces your identity to a six-digit number: I am 310445. And it removes all purpose from your actions: read a book, watch TV, lift weights, repeat. This produces a vacuum of positive modes to achieve power, identity, and purpose. However, it does not reduce the instinctual drive people have to pursue these things.

So they do pursue them—always by whatever means are available, usually through joining ranks with a negative community.

And what does this look like? For me, I shaved my head, got tattoos, and committed acts of violence all to be accepted by a community. I spent years in solitary confinement and higher-custody units because, in prison, traits like aggression and apathy are the markers of "manhood" and "respectability." It took the unwavering support of my loved ones over several years for me to realize that this isn't the type of man I want to be or the kind of respect I want to receive.

And this journey is not unique to me or people who look like me. It doesn't matter if you are white, black, brown, or some other variation in pigment, there are many of these communities in prison able and eager to accept new recruits. I ask you to sit with this thought for a moment. Incarceration saturates prisoners with the very factors that produce negative communities: isolation, violence, conflict, shame. These things allow for negative communities to sprout up and perpetuate misbehaviors until these behaviors become individually habituated. And at the risk of sounding simple: this isn't good. But nevertheless, that is our reality—our normal. Our day in, day out, inescapable state of existence. That is life inside prison.

But college in prison generates a balance to this negativity. It makes a space where people can pursue power, identity, and purpose in ways that better themselves and help other people. It produces a positive community, which here in Monroe is UBB.

In this program, I have seen shy people become confident speakers. I have seen life-long criminals become paradigms of morality. I have even seen gang members become activists for social justice. At Saturday morning study hall, I have seen people show up not because they are seeking help, but because they want to be available for those who are. And in the classrooms, I have seen people engage in passionate discussions with other students that prison's not-so-subtle pressures of conformity tell them to avoid altogether. In this space, I have seen growth. More than that, I have seen the creation of a community that is strong, resilient, reliable, and, most of all, positive.

In a place like prison that is inundated with negatives, that community is invaluable. Let me get personal. May 1, 2018: Only a few people will know the significance that day has for me. On that Tuesday morning I called home for my weekly check-in only to have my mother tell me my father had died the night before. After donning the man-of-the-house role—ensuring everyone that things would be okay and that I would help them get through this—I went back to my cell, turned my fan on high so I would not be heard, sat on the floor in the back corner next to the toilet, and cried harder than I thought was possible. Before that moment I thought I knew how tough prison could be. But every hardship before that was a joke. Losing someone I loved and being kept from the arms of those I had left—by bars and walls and 200 miles—those are the toughest moments of my life.

Just two hours later I went to Caroline Pew's chemistry class because I didn't know where else to be. I sat for three hours in that room without telling a soul what had happened. And while I couldn't tell you anything she taught that day, I do remember the comfort of being surrounded by people that I cared about and respected. I remember feeling a part of a community.

I said in the beginning that this is no normal graduation—let me drive home why that is: This isn't normal because the community we have created is extraordinary. Despite the hardships, the presence of negative communities, and the many other troubling realities of prison, we have come together to support one another—to create the conditions that allow ourselves and others to prosper. And how did we do this? By building a new community—one unified in its belief that single actions in our worst moments will not define us forever, that our humanity isn't some imagined fiction that we've conjured up. The real value of college in prison is that it was the catalyst for forming this positive community—my positive community.

I'll end with one request, that though arguably unrelated, is important nonetheless. Today as we celebrate our achievement, let us not lose sight of what our ultimate goal must be, and that is to build a society in which our celebrations do not take place behind bars but beyond them.

Thank you for listening, and thank you to the University Beyond Bars.

The Takeaway

Inmates, myself included, face massive barriers to rehabilitation inside our nation's carceral system. But when given access to quality college-in-prison programs, we overcome these obstacles, thriving as members of a community built on hope, purpose, and support. If what we want at the end of the day is better people coming home from prison, then what we need are more programs like UBB.

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